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# LOUISVILLE CONFERENCE

## JUNE 21-27, 1917

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS: THE CHANGING PUBLIC  
By WALTER L. BROWN, *Librarian, Buffalo Public Library*

The history of library work in this country is one of continual advance since the first conference of the American Library Association. The place of the free public circulating library in this advance has been the central one, not only by reason of its extent, but also because its idea and purpose is a new force in public life. The character of its work has changed and is changing with new conditions which have resulted from the expansion of the field of public library activity and the founding of new libraries to meet special needs. The greatest problems of the free circulating libraries come from the change in their public rather than from need for new methods of administration.

The American Library Association was peculiarly fortunate in its founders. It is most remarkable that there was so much genius for detail in that body of pioneers of library coöperation. It was a scholarly body, hence its clear vision of the future wide use of books and its ability to lay the foundation of the structure of the public library as a civic institution is easily understood. Its skill in designing and so far perfecting the methods of conducting this new work of its dreams is more surprising.

The development of library methods is not unlike that of the designing of the printed book, which has been described as having been "mature at birth." There has been little change in the ways of doing library work since the early years of the Association. Most of the contributions of later years have but filled in the outlines which were drawn at that time, to meet the requirements of the larger work, just as the schemes of classification devised at the same period have been elaborated to

meet the need of a much greater number of books and subject headings. It is difficult, without a thorough review, to realize how large a part of our professional knowledge we owe to the early conferences.

The American Library Association brought together for the first time the library people of the country, who came mostly from university and reference libraries, some from society libraries and others from the few public libraries of that time; who had, as individuals, worked upon many of the same problems and now found opportunity to compare experiences and to discuss questions of method. The early conferences were extremely effective. Classification, cataloging, arrangement, housing and storage of books, standards of materials and furniture, the training of library workers, the freedom and restrictions of the use of libraries, the formation of public opinion as to the place of the library in education and in the social life of the community—all of these and many more questions of policy and method were discussed under the new-found stimulus of coöperation.

The thoroughness of the early conferences in the discussion of these matters and the early standardization of details have had much to do with the rapid expansion of library work, the extent of which is shown by the growth of the American Library Association from its small beginnings to its present membership and its diversified interests. The original membership of the Association was made up, with few famous exceptions, from small libraries. The users of the libraries were from limited small groups of people having tastes and needs more or less analogous. This was almost as true of the few public libraries of that time

as it was of the university and subscription libraries.

The new enthusiasm aroused by the conferences awakened librarians to tremendous possibilities in the general use of books, and aroused in them an ambition to have as many as possible of the people of their communities counted among their readers, aiming from the first to supply "the best reading for the largest number at the least cost." The libraries became more and more of a social force, the value of their books being measured not so much by their numbers or by their rarity as by the service they might render to the community in which they are placed.

In the development of the public library from the small collection of books in care of a very small staff, offering something to read to a very few people, to the large systems of today, with their many departments and many libraries to meet the complex needs of the many-sided life of our big cities, is the evidence of a new public and new problems calling for special work by the public library and for special training for its workers.

A large part of library training is at present given to matters which do not touch the most important work of the public library. Necessary as is the fascinating study of methods, the perfecting of classification and the making of catalogs, this is, after all, only a preparation for the making of the tools, only smoothing the way for doing public library work, rather than training for the real work itself. The average reader using the public library has no interest whatever in library technique, and measures the excellence of the library only by the simplicity and quickness of its service in supplying his need.

The most important training, so far as the public library service is concerned, is that which contributes toward an understanding of the things of the spirit and of the activities of the world, a knowledge of the past, a knowledge of books, and above all a knowledge of and a liking for people. These, together with the ability to know

people in their varied life and interests and to be able to help them, with broad sympathy, to choose the right book at the right time, are qualifications desired for a large part of the public library.

The larger part of the work of the public library of today is work with the many as contrasted with its earlier work with the few. The original small group of library borrowers was probably of the more intellectual members of the community. Although the public library of the present does not neglect the interests of the scholar, and, because of the system of inter-library loans, it is better able than ever to serve him, yet its emphasis has changed as the circle of its influence has been drawn larger and larger, bringing within its influence more and more of the less educated and less trained. The public library is thus becoming, year after year, the elementary, the secondary, and the part-time school, rather than the university of the people, as it used to be called. What the library offers must serve as the nearest approach to formal education that the larger proportion of the people who have had but a few years of school can ever hope to have, yet we must admit that in large measure any real training by the use of books our readers may receive is, for the most part, a matter of chance.

In his "Manual of drawing," W. W. Rawson says: "Throughout the course, I have taken it for granted that drawing is not studied in the elementary schools primarily as art, any more than reading, writing and composition are studied primarily as literature. We are not in the habit of supposing, when teaching a child through verbal means to think logically and express himself clearly, that we design him to be a novelist."

Something akin to this is the service of the public library to large numbers of its present public who, whatever their years, are elementary readers. Very many of them have a realization of an ill-defined need—a need to know, a need to do, a longing for some foundation for hope, some expectation of satisfaction. They use

books, when they wake up to the possibility of help from them, as a means toward more abundant life—more intelligent, more efficient, more powerful, more satisfying. Life and growth are the objects of their search, not the study of literature, not the appreciation of the beauty or perfection of the medium through which they satisfy the need of definite knowledge and the indefinite hunger for a wider outlook and for the foundation for a more vivid hope. The very absence of the literary touch is sometimes an advantage in a book to be used with such elementary readers.

Different libraries at work today could be used as a graphic exhibit of the interesting development of the public library in all its stages, from its simple beginnings to the largest library systems. In most places, whether town, city or county, the public library is at the beginning not only wholly in one building, but it is without any division of its borrowers. Its organization into departments for administrative purposes comes with its increase of use. One group after another is given special attention by being provided with a separate collection of books in a department under the care of an expert attendant or staff. The children's room is followed by the technical room, the art and music room, the civic room, and others organized to meet the special needs of the community. In time the library discovers that many possible readers, unconscious of the help which it offers, are really waiting to have the library brought to them, and library extension work is commenced. Library stations, depositories and branch libraries are opened, while traveling libraries are sent to readers in schools, shops and clubs, and book-wagons and parcel post bring many more individuals within touch of the public library.

In some cities the work of the public library has been so completely organized that every section is within easy reach of some agency of distribution. Even where this is accomplished, the use of the book continues to increase and the possibilities

of more intensive work are still far from being realized.

Of late years there has come a new development which will not be without direct effect upon the work of the public library. We are witnessing the formation of new libraries, some possibly for the present merely as departments of older ones, but many of them entirely independent of the public library. We have libraries of civics, libraries of legislative reference, thoroughly organized school libraries, special libraries in many large industrial plants and corporation offices, and libraries in business and professional clubs, many of them in charge of librarians trained for their special field. The public library has no feeling of rivalry or jealousy toward these independent libraries for special needs, but rather does it feel a sense of relief to have certain groups of readers better cared for and, at the same time, to have made available more time and means to broaden the usefulness of the public library for the less specialized readers, thus bringing more of its resources to the service of its primary function—that of making better and more intelligent citizens, of raising the average of citizenship, and the Americanization of new Americans.

Looking toward the more elementary work required by the larger part of its recruits gives to the free public library its widest vision for the future. It is far from having measured its possibilities for usefulness, for the extent of its influence reaches far into an undiscovered country which is very alluring.

In addition to what the public library has been able to do to help the specific work of the school, it has found in the school one of the best and most fertile opportunities for creating a love of good reading. It should be remembered, however, that, while the work of the library goes on in the school from year to year, the average individual child is under the school's influence a very brief period, after which the children become a part of the general public. To what extent the public library retains these former school children

as library readers it is not possible for us to say. We do know that an ever-increasing number of them are finding after a few years that the brevity of their school period has proved a handicap in doing their work in the world and that they are eager to gain further training.

Nearly every one of our cities has a few hundred, some many thousands, of people under an even greater handicap than the limited time pupils of our day schools, because they are without the language of the country. We know the children of these people, with their eagerness for information concerning America and their quickness in picking up American ways, but comparatively few of the elders of these new Americans are as yet in touch with the public library. The reason for this may be because of their hesitation to enter a formal building doubtful of what their reception may be, rather than from any lack of appreciation of what the public library has to offer them.

A certain public library issued, a few weeks ago, a special invitation to the pupils of the English classes of the night schools to attend an evening reception. In preparation for this evening the pupils were told about the public library, what it was and what they could find there, and were taught certain English phrases to facilitate their asking questions and making their needs known.

As the acceptance of the public library invitation was optional, there was much speculation as to the number of these pupils who would be enough interested to expend an evening and carfare for the purpose. The supervisor of night schools estimated five hundred, while the librarian hoped that two hundred and fifty could be induced to come. The fact was that more than one thousand men and women, representing many nationalities, visited the library building that night and evinced the greatest interest in the library and what it had to offer them as an educational institution. It was a revelation of a large section of the public which, through lack of some point of contact, was not getting

the service which the public library should render.

Many opportunities of informal education are now being offered to grown people and a natural question arises as to what extent they are finding any association or connection with the public library in these substitutes for formal schools.

It would seem as though the public library had a duty fully as important, probably more important, toward the many out of school, who are seeking information, as the duty, fully recognized, which it renders to those still under educational guidance.

In the phrase "informal education" is included all the means of more or less systematic education other than the schools, such as the various industrial training classes in manufacturing plants, corporation schools, reading courses offered by the Chautauquas and similar institutions, movements like that of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, the study work of business, social and trade clubs, lecture courses available to the public, university extension work, and the educational possibilities of art galleries, museums, public concerts, parks and other municipal activities.

Some of these educational efforts do have close coöperation with the public library, but there are others which have very little or none at all. The public library might, for its own part, however, not only be familiar with all the educational agencies in its community, and what they offer, but might easily become a valuable supplementary factor in all such work, and might, at the same time, bring to the pupils an acquaintance with the opportunities offered by the library itself.

The students connected with such groups are, however, but tens of the hundreds and the thousands of readers who are finding their way among our books.

Should the library assume any further responsibility toward aimless general readers? Library policy has provided them with open shelves upon which the books are grouped by subject, it makes small at-

tructive collections of books upon subjects of special or passing interest, it provides printed lists of annotated titles to induce the readers to select the better books and encourages in every way the use of good books—but is it neglecting an opportunity to help the individual? Every public library can furnish illustrations of certain borrowers who have developed and advanced under the sympathetic guidance of some library friend, and these borrowers are perhaps but representatives from a large class which might be helped if a way could be found to offer something more in the way of individual suggestion, if not individual training.

Without formalizing in any way the work of the public library, without its becoming less broad in its sympathies, it may find it possible to arrange courses of reading with guidance which would attract some of its many desultory readers. In some departments, at least, there would be little difficulty in finding the right people to coöperate with the library in this kind of work.

A trained technical or vocational teacher would be of considerable value in the library to help with personal counsel and advice in their difficulties many of those who are using books more or less blindly in the continuation of their elementary technical study in connection with their work, and to arrange and supervise reading courses for the workers in various trades, arts and occupations.

It may sometime prove possible to have a teacher assigned by the school authorities for this duty, in the same manner as the library has often assigned an expert to help the library work in the schools.

A library reading course might well be arranged in academic studies, as well as vocational, under volunteer inspectors or advisers. "To every workman there are eager apprentices who are hungry to know, not his way, but the way. Every workman who does the best he can has a store of value for the younger ones, who are drawn, they know not why, to the production he represents. . . . I would have my country call upon every man who shows vision or fineness in any work to serve for an hour or two each day . . . telling the mysteries of his daily work."—Will Lexington Comfort.

Is it not possible that the public library can use its wonderful medium as a link between those eager to learn and the skillful, intelligent workers who know?

In the continued expansion of the work of the free public circulating library into that "untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever," may it not go much further than it has yet gone toward supplying a need constantly apparent of many of our untrained readers? May it not think more seriously, broadly and sympathetically of responding to the definite needs of the individual, and make quantity in the circulation of books secondary to nourishing the more abundant life?

#### DEMOCRACY AND WORLD POLITICS\*

By SHAILER MATHEWS, D. D., *Dean, Divinity School, University of Chicago*

Mr. President and Members of the Association: In coming before you at this time I ask you to consider a message which I hope may be of some significance to you and through you to the world to whom you

minister. Day before yesterday I was at one of the great training camps of the Officers' Reserve, where there were five thousand young men, the finest body of young men I ever saw together, and I have been with college students for thirty years. I saw their situation as I had never seen it

\*Stenographic report of an extemporeous address.